



ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" — Bahá'u'lláh

Published on *One Country* (<http://onecountry.org>)

Source URL: <http://onecountry.org/story/botswana-simple-sewing-club-women-makes-big-difference>

Issue date:

January-March 2000

Volume number:

11

Issue number:

4

DEVELOPMENT

In Botswana, a simple sewing club for women makes a big difference

The Oodi Sewing Club is modest as development projects go. It takes no money from the outside and its membership has numbered a total of 25 women, mostly poor single mothers. Yet more than half have found jobs since joining and virtually all say they have found a new confidence.

OODI, Botswana - As a young unmarried mother in this small village of 2,000 people some 25 kilometers north of Gaborone, Segametsi struggled for many months to find enough money just to feed and clothe her 18-month-old baby.



Now she earns a

modest income making clothing in her home, thanks to her membership in a sewing cooperative established

as a small-scale economic development project by the local Bahá'í community here.

"Before joining this sewing club, life was difficult because my baby needed food and clothes, but I didn't know how to get them," said Segametsi, who is 20 years old and like other women in this region uses just a single name. "I didn't have money. But I am very happy now, because I am learning and working every day. I have my own money. After buying what my baby needs, I help my parents."

As development projects go, the Oodi Sewing Club, as the cooperative is known, is a modest one. Since its beginning in 1995, about 25 women - the majority of whom are poor single mothers like Segametsi - have cycled through the club's membership. In terms of results, however, the club has been a small-scale success story - and a case study in grassroots community development. As of early 2000, nearly all of its first 15 members had found jobs. One is now working in a clothing factory, at least three are working as tailors, and most of the others have started their own home businesses.

"As the result of this project and other projects for women, the women start working in the village instead of going to town to work," said Chief Semile, the village headman. "The wages are less, but the women are closer to their children and family. In town they get more money, but they had to travel far and be away from their children and their family all day."

According to the United Nations, the average per capita income in Botswana is about \$2,500 per year. About 50 percent of the country's population, however, remains below the poverty line. And, as might be expected, single women compose many of those who are among the poorest of the poor.

In an effort to address such social and economic conditions, the Bahá'í community of Oodi began some years ago to consult about possible development projects. Composed of roughly 30 members, and inspired by Bahá'í teachings that emphasize the equality of women and men, the community felt there was a great need to help women, especially for teenage mothers, to develop a greater sense of self-worth by learning a skill that could provide steady income and independence. The idea for a sewing club and training project emerged from these consultations.

Nooran Mahmoudi, a Bahá'í of Iranian background who came to Oodi in 1995, had expertise in establishing sewing cooperatives, and she undertook to organize the club. With the assistance of Chief Semile, the Club received permission from the Village Development Committee to use the community hall one day a week.

"Many of the women were complaining that it was hard to find jobs and feed their families, especially their children," said Ms. Mahmoudi. "I felt I could be of service by giving free sewing classes and establishing a sewing cooperative to channel the skill and efforts of the ladies in a productive way."

The club has received no outside funds and is entirely self-supporting. Ms. Mahmoudi provided the initial materials. In the course of their instruction, members made cushions and clothing and sold them. Part of those earnings was then used to purchase more material.

Those who joined the club soon found that sewing was not difficult. This discovery brought hope, which in turn motivated participants to work harder and produce more and better quality items.

"My children are happy now, because I am working and able to buy what they need for school, such as shoes, clothes and food," said Sekgopi, a 31-year-old single mother with three children. "I want in the future to buy my own sewing machine and work at home as a dressmaker. I always wanted to learn to sew."



Zimbabwe, which Ms. Mahmoudi started in 1992. Located in an outlying village, at one point it had some 45 members and was an inspiration to women in neighboring villages, where at least two similar clubs were launched. All three Zimbabwe clubs are still functioning, and at least 9 members have bought their own sewing machines and established their own businesses.

Although trained as a mechanical engineer, Mrs. Mahmoudi now sees herself as a community development worker. "In Zimbabwe, when we asked people what they wanted to learn, they all said 'sewing,' so I just taught people what I knew," said Mrs. Mahmoudi. "I've tried to use the same experience in Botswana."

In mid-1996, the Oodi project was moved to a new location, a small hut which is open to members every day. Classes are held one afternoon per week. The club has received several sewing machines, and with their arrival members developed a new marketing idea. They decided to make several samples of school uniforms and take them to the local schools for sale, as there is no uniform shop or a tailor in the village to provide this service. For some club members, making school uniforms has now become a regular source of income.

"This club is very good for our village," said Diana Meswele, a member of the Village Development Committee. "The girls and women are learning. They did not have hope, but now they are able to work and feel good about themselves."

- *Reported by Ladan Doorandish-Vance*
